

February 13, 2013

EXHIBIT 8
DATE 2/14/2013
HB 370

Dear Members of the Montana Legislature;

I am writing to express my support for HB 370, which would abolish the death penalty in the state of Montana.

As a faith leader, I have serious doubts about the role of civil government in exacting the death penalty as punishment. Living in Sidney, Montana, I also understand the dynamics of grief, pain, anger, and a feeling of the need for retribution in the face of profound loss. I had been here for a year when this community was shattered by the senseless, tragic death of Sherry Arnold, beloved teacher, mother, wife, daughter and friend of so many. The deep wounds imposed on Sherry's family and friends are still very raw, and the anger at her death bubbles to the surface with little provocation. The urge to find some way to exact "justice" on the two men accused of this crime is strong.

When I consider whether the government can accomplish its goal of deterring crime by imposing the death penalty on those who have already committed criminal acts, I wonder if we might be teaching just the opposite lesson: that it is acceptable to deliberately, with premeditation, end the life of someone as a way of punishing them for doing that very same thing to another human being. I understand the feeling of not wanting a murderer to have the privilege of life among those whom he or she has hurt. I respect the views of those who say that "an eye for an eye" is a call for Biblical justice. But I also have to remember that Jesus, when he was on the cross, dying an unfair and premeditated death exacted by the Roman government because they feared he was trying to usurp their power, did not call down the power of death on those who were killing him. Perhaps his most powerful words were, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Do I believe that people who set out to end a life or lives, to destroy families and communities and to wield their power over those who have lost loved ones, should be allowed to resume their place in society with no punishment? No, no and no again. People must be held accountable for their wrong behavior. I also understand that there may be those who will never be able to turn their lives around, realize the wrong they have done and become members of society around whom we would feel safe and secure. For those, there is a sentence of life in prison, and, I believe, deservedly so. But do we have the right – does the government have the right – to bring about the death of another human being? Is that justice, or simple revenge? Do we need to retain the right to kill people, in order to be known as a just society?

The resources necessary to pursue a death penalty case are enormous, as those of us who live in Richland County can attest. I would ask if it would be more productive for those resources to be directed toward efforts to reduce or prevent the causes of violence that leads to the desired imposition of the death penalty.

The fear that sets in when someone we care about has been taken from us can easily overwhelm us. Fear quickly becomes anger, and then we are reacting out of anger rather than dealing with the fear that lies beneath. If our fear leads us to believe that allowing the government to be the agent of death for those who have seriously harmed another is justice, aren't we condoning the very act that we are condemning?

As a faith leader, I wrestle with how to answer sin with justice *and* grace. I believe that abolishing the death penalty would be a step in the right direction toward that goal.

Thank you for allowing me to offer my thoughts to you.

Respectfully,

Vicki Waddington

United Methodist Pastor

Sidney, Montana